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OPERATIONAL MANEUVER FROM THE SEA:  
AN EVOLVING CONCEPT

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War college or the Department of the Navy.

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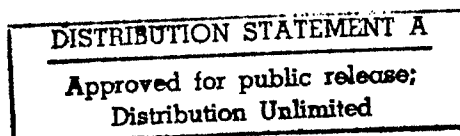
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Abstract of  
OPERATIONAL MANEUVER FROM THE SEA:  
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This paper examines the concept of Operational Maneuver From The Sea (OMFTS). The primary objective of this paper was to gain a better understanding of what OMFTS is and just as importantly what it is not. Through an analysis of the history of amphibious warfare this paper will conclude that OMFTS is not a new concept, indicating a radical change in Marine Corps doctrine, but rather it is actually another evolutionary step forward in the art of amphibious warfare. An evolutionary step made necessary by the changing strategic environment and made possible by advances in technology. This paper will also analyze the capabilities of the OMFTS concept and highlight its value to the operational commander. Finally, this paper will provide some insight into how OMFTS will impact on the thinking and practices of the Operational and Naval commander.

Reading on the OMFTS concept were scarce. The concept was in a final draft form. However, the final draft and associated readings provided enough information to conduct analysis and draw supportable conclusions.

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OPERATIONAL MANEUVER FROM THE SEA:  
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INTRODUCTION

Naval White Papers "...From the Sea" and "Forward...From The Sea" set the strategic direction for the naval services, requiring the Navy/Marine Corps to develop capabilities on littoral operations and maintaining United States influence around the globe to meet the needs of a changing strategic environment.<sup>1</sup> In response the Marine Corps has developed the concept of Operational Maneuver From The Sea (OMFTS). OMFTS is not a revolutionary way of conceptualizing amphibious warfare. The concept of projecting naval forces ashore is timeless. Advances in technology, driven by the requirements of a changing strategic environment, combine to precipitate the evolution of new amphibious warfare concepts. OMFTS is a result of this evolutionary process.

The artificial sense of world order imposed by the competition between two superpowers has been removed. This artificially imposed world order has been replaced by a very real and volatile world embroiled in regional conflicts. As the lone remaining superpower, the United States (U.S.) finds itself facing new challenges in an increasingly complex and hostile strategic environment.

While the strategic environment is changing, the core U.S. national security interests have remained constant. The National Military Strategy (NMS) has shifted its focus from the clearly defined linear battle lines of an east versus west

global war to responding to the uncertainties of regional crises. The importance of the littoral areas of the world has increased dramatically with this new strategic environment. Potential conflicts in littoral areas pose significant threats to U.S. national security interests.

OMFTS incorporates both the philosophy of maneuver warfare and enhanced technologies to produce a concept which has application across the entire operational continuum. It provides the operational commander with needed regional response options.

#### THE EVOLUTION OF AMPHIBIOUS WARFARE

The evolution of amphibious warfare has always been directly linked to advances in technology. This linkage can be traced back through history. Thucydides' history of the Peloponnesian war chronicles numerous examples of the advantages of sea-power that have been claimed by nations whose naval forces could most effectively conduct warfare on and from the sea.<sup>2</sup> Even with their rudimentary technology, these ancient societies understood and capitalized on the inherent flexibility of an amphibious force which could maintain a forward presence, project power ashore, and respond rapidly to any crisis in austere, hostile environments.

For centuries amphibious warfare remained relatively unchanged, with men rowing ashore from sailing ships, until advances in technology produced such inventions as the wireless radio, the internal combustion engine, and aircraft.

These inventions provided the vehicle for advancing amphibious warfare concepts. World War II saw the employment of ship-to-shore and air-to-ground radio communications, motorized amphibious assault vehicles, and fighter/bomber aircraft in amphibious operations on a global scale. These increased capabilities of speed, mobility, and lethality of sea-based forces expanded the dimensions of the battlefield. Sea-based forces could strike their enemies from greater distances and with more mass than previously possible. Despite the unqualified successes of these amphibious operations, warfighting doctrine was still limited to attrition warfare. Forces were restricted to landing across a few select beaches and attacking along a linear front, directly into the strength of the enemy's defenses.

The introduction of the helicopter during the Korean War further expanded the dimensions of the battlefield. The helicopter's mobility allowed forces to strike the enemy from even greater distances, with more speed, and into areas previously inaccessible. These air mobile maneuver forces caused the enemy to expand his defensive perimeter. However, the helicopter could not transport massed sea-based units. Major operations were still limited to landing across a beach, along a linear front, and into the enemy's defenses.

Current technological innovations, such as the Advanced Amphibious Assault Vehicle (AAAV), Landing Craft Air Cushioned (LCAC), and the V-22 Tiltrotor aircraft, have produced

improved amphibious mobility platforms making more of the littorals accessible to sea-based power projection. With the advent of these technologies amphibious warfare concepts have evolved from an era of attrition warfare into an era of maneuver warfare. The concept of OMFTS applies the principles of maneuver warfare to sea-based power projection, thus providing the operational commander with new crisis response options and capabilities.

#### THE STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT

"The cold war was a dangerous, but ordered, place."<sup>3</sup> The breakup of the former Soviet Union removed the controls which were imposed over resentful nations. The result was the spread of regional instability, fueled by the resurgence of long suppressed ethnic, religious, territorial, and cultural rivalries. These regional conflicts have replaced global nuclear war as the most potentially dangerous threat to U.S. national security interests. The Joint Chiefs of Staff 1992 Mobility Requirements Study executive summary states: "The United States is rapidly adapting to a changed global security environment. The new defense orientation is primarily regional, requiring the ability to respond quickly and effectively to unpredictable challenges to U.S. interests..."<sup>4</sup>

Although the global security environment is changing rapidly, the overarching national security objectives which guide our military objectives, strategy, and forces have remained constant:

- The survival of the United States as a free and independent nation, with its fundamental values intact and its institutions and people secure.
- A healthy and growing U.S. economy to ensure opportunity for individual prosperity and resources for national endeavors at home and abroad.
- Healthy, cooperative, and politically vigorous relations with allies and friendly nations.
- A stable and secure world where political and economic freedom, human rights, and democratic institutions flourish.<sup>5</sup>

From these national security interests the Clinton Administration developed its national foreign policy of "Enlargement", consisting of three elements:

- Ensure national security
- Stimulate U.S. economic growth
- Promote democracy<sup>6</sup>

The current National Military Strategy (NMS) reflects both the national security interests and national foreign policy objectives. The NMS has been adapted to meet these objectives within the context of a new strategic environment. Its intent is to shape a military that is capable of providing flexible, timely, and appropriate responses to any regional conflict. The NMS consists of four elements:

- Strategic deterrence and defense
- Forward presence
- Crisis response
- Reconstitution<sup>7</sup>

In the midst of these changes, certain significant aspects of the strategic landscape have remained unchanged:



- Seventy percent of the world's population lives within 200 miles of the sea.
- Eighty percent of the world's capitals lie within 300 miles of the sea.
- Ninety-nine percent of U.S. exports by weight travel on the seas, through numerous choke points controlled by states in crisis.
- Outside the industrialized democracies many national infrastructures are in decay and ruin. Few third world airfields can receive large American aircraft; port facilities are unable to handle large sealift ships; and roads and railroads are poorly managed or non-existent.<sup>8</sup>

Of the 73 potential flashpoints listed in Jane's Defense Weekly, 55 are located in littoral areas.<sup>9</sup> This statistic illustrates how critical it is for the U.S. to maintain stability in the littoral areas of the world.

An additional component of the strategic environment is the impact of domestic policies and public opinion on the U.S. military structure and employment. The combination of the downsizing of the military services and the closure of overseas forward bases has impacted the military's ability to rapidly respond to a regional crisis overseas. Public opinion expects military operations to be conducted quickly, decisively, and at minimal costs. The traditional costs of attrition warfare are no longer acceptable to the American public. Maneuver warfare is the cost-effective doctrine which meets the public's expectations.

#### THE OMFTS CONCEPT

OMFTS is defined as a "...concept for the projection of power ashore. It is both a philosophy for military operations and a guide for naval force evolution."<sup>10</sup> The OMFTS concept is based on maneuver warfare doctrine. This doctrine is described as a philosophy "...that seeks to shatter the enemy's cohesion through a series of rapid, violent, and unexpected actions which create a turbulent and rapidly deteriorating situation with which he cannot cope."<sup>11</sup>

OMFTS is not a doctrine with rigid parameters. To create the conditions necessary in maneuver warfare, OMFTS is guided by nine general principles which allow for multiple applications of a concept that:

- Focuses on the strategic objective
- Treats the sea as maneuver space
- Creates overwhelming tempo
- Generates momentum
- Applies strength against weakness
- Integrates all assets in accomplishing the mission
- Relies on intelligence
- Keys on advanced force operations
- Emphasizes flexibility<sup>12</sup>

OMFTS is a product of the marriage of the philosophies of maneuver and amphibious warfare. This concept elevates amphibious warfare from a doctrine of attrition to maneuver warfare. The characteristics of OMFTS that make it unique from the traditional form of amphibious warfare include:

- Treating the sea as maneuver space
- Ship To Objective Maneuver
- The Naval Expeditionary Force concept

Treating the Sea as Maneuver Space: Historically, the sea has provided the ultimate maneuver space for those who control it. Operating from movable islands, sea-based forces can project power ashore. However, the sea has usually been viewed as a highway over which forces transit to a point where operations can begin ashore. The naval elements transporting these forces were not included as part of the maneuver force. Within the concept of OMFTS the sea is viewed as true maneuver space with all components participating in maneuver warfare.

Land and amphibious maneuver concepts are identical. Ground forces designate land areas as assembly areas, attack positions, and lines of departure. Sea-based forces use ships as their assembly areas, designate coordinates at sea as their attack positions, and cross the line of departure well out to sea. The sea is maneuver space; the only difference between land- and sea-based forces is the surface over which they operate.

Continuing with the concept that maneuver begins at sea, operations are no longer conducted in phases with pauses between each phase. OMFTS provides for seamless, continuous STOM operations. The inherent flexibility of using the sea as maneuver space enables naval forces to position themselves

where and when it best suits the operational scheme of maneuver. This expands the battlespace the enemy has to defend.

Just as with ground forces, the objective of maneuver from the sea is to place the enemy on the horns of a dilemma by creating an overwhelming operational tempo to which he cannot react or generate simultaneous situations to which he is incapable of responding. The Pacific campaign of World War II (WWII) provides an example of the advantages using the sea as maneuver space to place the Japanese in just such a dilemma. The Japanese were faced with two separate forces attacking north along separate axes, General MacArthur in the Western Pacific and Admiral Nimitz in the Central Pacific. Using the sea as maneuver space these two forces compelled the Japanese to distribute their defenses across both axes making it impossible for them to mass their defenses against either axis. The inability to conduct a coordinated defense led to the Japan's ultimate defeat.

The European campaign of WWII demonstrated the same operational concepts. Allied forces attacked east along two axes, northern and southern, and placed the German High Command in the same dilemma as the Japanese. The only difference between these two campaigns was the surface over the forces maneuvered.

The Pacific campaign illustrates another advantage of using the sea as maneuver space. Sea-based forces were able

to bypass defensive strong points whose seizure was not essential to achieving the objective. They were able to conserve resources and maintain momentum while concentrating on critical objectives.

OMFTS capitalizes on the advantages of using the sea as maneuver space, allowing the sea-based forces to apply their capabilities where they are most needed and when it is most advantageous.

Ship To Objective Maneuver: Ship to objective maneuver (STOM) is a component of the OMFTS concept. STOM provides the means for sea-based forces to achieve the strategic objective by creating a series of rapid, violent, and unexpected actions, which are the heart of the maneuver warfare philosophy.

Employment of advanced amphibious mobility assets, AAV, LCAC, and the V-22 aircraft, will enable assault forces to establish battlespace dominance ashore by rapidly landing concentrations of forces simultaneously at widely separated objectives. STOM transforms the battlefield from its traditional linear form to a new multi-dimension form, encompassing a greater width and depth than ever before. These mobility assets will generate momentum by rapidly concentrating combat power ashore. Additionally, overwhelming tempo will be created as forces are landed at their objectives over a wide area. Forces will not have to conduct long approach marches to their objective after conducting an assault across a defended beach. The inherent flexibility of

STOM allows forces to bypass enemy strengths and attack his weaknesses.

STOM reduces the requirement for preassault operations. While mine sweeping and destruction of obstacles are still important capabilities, these operations signal intentions and compromise the element of surprise. Sea-based forces will attack through gaps in the enemy's defenses. These gaps may have to be created by conducting smaller covert preassault operations. STOM also reduces the need to develop a large support infrastructure ashore. Unless forces are engaged in sustained operations ashore they could draw support from sea-based assets.

STOM also reduces the requirement to transfer authority ashore, thus eliminating the need to establish redundant Command, Control, Communications, Computers, and Intelligence (C4I) systems ashore. The commander can maintain control using sea- and space-based systems. This unity of command enhances the seamless, continuous execution of the operation.

Operation Eastern Exit provides an example of the advantages of STOM.<sup>13</sup> Helicopters deployed from an Amphibious Ready Group (ARG) at sea, flew to the objective, loaded evacuees, and returned to the ARG. Unity of command and effort were constant throughout this operation.

The Naval Expeditionary Force: The Naval Expeditionary Force (NEF) is another evolving concept, which is described as a "...capability, not a structure."<sup>14</sup> The NEF shares the same

characteristics as the Marine Air Ground Task Force (MAGTF) concept. A MAGTF is a task organized unit designed to meet the specific needs of the commander, built around its four required component elements: Command and Control, Aviation, Ground Combat, and Combat Service Support. The NEF would also be task organized and possess its two required component elements: naval forces and an embarked MAGTF.

The NEF may be structured to possess all Navy warfighting capabilities along with its embarked MAGTF, or the NEF may consist of an carrier battle group with an embarked MAGTF, such as when a Marine MAGTF embarked aboard the USS Theodore Roosevelt.<sup>15</sup> The initial conceptual design is for the NEF to be built around a carrier battle group and a Marine expeditionary unit sized MAGTF embarked on amphibious ships.<sup>16</sup> Units and capabilities may be added to the NEF, such as a Marine air contingency force or maritime preposition ships, to meet operational requirements. No matter what its structure the NEF will have the capability to establish battlespace dominance at sea, while the MAGTF can extend battlespace dominance ashore. The product of combining the NEF and OMFTS concepts is the ability to quickly project an appropriate force ashore in response to any littoral crisis.

#### OMFTS CAPABILITIES

The strategic focus of the U.S. has changed from a world engulfed in a struggle between two superpowers to a world of smaller regional crises. These crises range across the entire

operational continuum from humanitarian assistance, public unrest, and civil war to nations engaged in general war. While the strategic focus has changed, U.S. national security interests have remained constant. As the lone superpower the U.S. will regularly use the military to maintain the U.S. presence overseas, to remain an influential nation and to retain the ability to impact international events.

With the downsizing of the U.S. military services and the closure of overseas bases, sea-based forces will assume an even greater role in crisis response. The mobility, flexibility, sustainability, and maritime power projection ashore inherent in sea-based forces make them the force of choice to pursue U.S. national objectives.<sup>17</sup>

While OMFTS is designed for warfighting in the littorals, its principles are equally applicable across the operational continuum. These principles can be applied to power projection ashore, sustained operations ashore, and operations other than war.

A sea-based MAGTF employing OMFTS is a potent power projection force. Such a force that could be the operations main effort, attacking the operational/strategic objective, conducting supporting operations in an ongoing operation, or serving as an enabling force opening air-heads and ports for introduction of follow-on forces. The ability of one force to conduct this wide array of operations makes OMFTS a valuable, versatile tool for the operational commander.



Limited objective power projection forces can transition to sustained operations ashore if needed. This transition requires a transfer of authority ashore from the sea-based to the land-based commander and establishment of C4I systems and sustainment infrastructures ashore. When these operations are concluded, the force can be re-embarked and reconstituted at sea ready to further sea-based operations.

Throughout the spectrum of operations other than war, the principles of OMFTS are, again, equally applicable. All of these operations share the same requirements of rapid response, mobility, security, flexibility, and appropriate response forces, which are inherent within the OMFTS concept.

#### RECURRING THEMES

OMFTS is both a philosophy and a guide for naval evolution. As a guide to naval force evolution, OMFTS has key functional areas which have been recurrent themes throughout the history of amphibious warfare evolution. These need to be addressed to reap the full potential of the concept. The functional areas include:

- Mobility: Need to develop advanced amphibious maneuver platforms to provide true amphibious mobility from ship to objective.
- Intelligence: Decision makers require timely, relevant and understandable information, from all sources, for detailed planning and execution.
- Command and Control: Command and control must embody the idea of a single seamless operation.
- Fires: Ability of joint forces to deliver precision direct and indirect fires in immediate response, all-weather, and in volume.

- Aviation: Future sea-based aviation assets must be designed to quickly transition to ever more ever more austere ashore and afloat.
- Mine Countermeasures: Ability to detect and neutralize shallow water mines, conduct covert reconnaissance and clandestine mine clearing operations.
- Combat Service Support: Command and control system to communicate requirements and control flow of sustainment to assault forces.
- Training and Education: Navy/Marine staffs must be trained as effective and well rounded littoral teams.<sup>18</sup>

Technology will solve many of these functional issues.

However, emerging technology will not train and educate decision makers to think in terms of OMFTS. OMFTS concepts must be incorporated into all naval service training to prepare future decision makers to exploit the potential of this concept.

#### CONCLUSION

Naval White papers "...From the Sea" and "Forward...From the Sea" set the strategic direction for the naval services. The Marine Corps responded with the concept of OMFTS. Driven by the changing strategic environment, the concept integrates the principles of maneuver and amphibious warfare, an integration made possible by advances in technology.

The OMFTS concept is applicable across the operational continuum. The strategic environment is certain to continue to change. OMFTS and its multiple applications make it not only valid for today's strategic environment but also for the changing strategic environment of tomorrow.

OMFTS provides the operation commander with nearly unlimited options to respond to any crisis in the littoral areas of the world.

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